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ONE

RAYFORD Steele wore the uniform of the enemy of his soul, and he hated himself for it. He strode through Iraqi sand toward Baghdad Airport in his dress blues and was struck by the incongruity of it all.

From across the parched plain he heard the wails and screams of hundreds he wouldn't begin to be able to help. Any prayer of finding his wife alive depended on how quickly he could get to her. But there was no quick here. Only sand. And what about Chloe and Buck in the States? And Tsion?

Desperate, frantic, mad with frustration, he ripped off his natty waistcoat with its yellow braid, heavy epaulettes, and arm patches that identified a senior officer of the Global Community. Rayford did not take the time to unfasten the solid-gold buttons but sent them popping

across the desert floor. He let the tailored jacket slide from his shoulders and clutched the collar in his fists. Three, four, five times he raised the garment over his head and slammed it to the ground. Dust billowed and sand kicked up over his patent leather shoes.

Rayford considered abandoning all vestiges of his connection to Nicolae Carpathia's regime, but his attention was drawn again to the luxuriously appointed arm patches. He tore at them, intending to rip them free, as if busting himself from his own rank in the service of the Antichrist. But the craftsmanship allowed not even a fingernail between the stitches, and Rayford slammed the coat to the ground one more time. He stepped and booted it like an extra point, finally aware of what had made it heavier. His phone was in the pocket.

As he knelt to retrieve his coat, Rayford's maddening logic returned—the practicality that made him who he was. Having no idea what he might find in the ruins of his condominium, he couldn't treat as dispensable what might constitute his only remaining set of clothes.

Rayford jammed his arms into the sleeves like a little boy made to wear a jacket on a warm day. He hadn't bothered to shake the grit from it, so as he plunged on toward the skeletal remains of the airport, Rayford's lanky frame was less

impressive than usual. He could have been the survivor of a crash, a pilot who'd lost his cap and seen the buttons stripped from his uniform.

Rayford could not remember a chill before sundown in all the months he'd lived in Iraq. Yet something about the earthquake had changed not only the topography, but also the temperature. Rayford had been used to damp shirts and a sticky film on his skin. But now wind, that rare, mysterious draft, chilled him as he speed-dialed Mac McCullum and put the phone to his ear.

At that instant he heard the chug and whir of Mac's chopper behind him. He wondered where they were going.

"Mac here," came McCullum's gravely voice.

Rayford whirled and watched the copter eclipse the descending sun. "I can't believe this thing works," Rayford said. He had slammed it to the ground and kicked it, but he also assumed the earthquake would have taken out nearby cellular towers.

"Soon as I get out of range, it won't, Ray," Mac said. "Everything's down for as far as I can see. These units act like walkie-talkies when we're close. When you need a cellular boost, you won't find it."

"So any chance of calling the States—"

"Is out of the question," Mac said. "Ray,

Potentate Carpathia wants to speak to you, but first—”

“I don’t want to talk to him, and you can tell him that.”

“But before I give you to him,” Mac continued, “I need to remind you that our meeting, yours and mine, is still on for tonight. Right?”

Rayford slowed and stared at the ground, running a hand through his hair. “What? What are you talking about?”

“All right then, very good,” Mac said. “We’re still meeting tonight then. Now the potentate—”

“I understand you want to talk to me later, Mac, but don’t put Carpathia on or I swear I’ll—”

“Stand by for the potentate.”

Rayford switched the phone to his right hand, ready to smash it on the ground, but he restrained himself. When avenues of communication reopened, he wanted to be able to check on his loved ones.

“Captain Steele,” came the emotionless tone of Nicolae Carpathia.

“I’m here,” Rayford said, allowing his disgust to come through. He assumed God would forgive anything he said to the Antichrist, but he swallowed what he really wanted to say.

“Though we both know how I *could* respond to your egregious disrespect and insubordination,” Carpathia said, “I choose to forgive you.”

Rayford continued walking, clenching his teeth to keep from screaming at the man.

“I can tell you are at a loss for how to express your gratitude,” Carpathia continued. “Now listen to me. I have a safe place and provisions where my international ambassadors and staff will join me. You and I both know we need each other, so I suggest—”

“You don’t need me,” Rayford said. “And I don’t need your forgiveness. You have a perfectly capable pilot right next to you, so let *me* suggest that you forget me.”

“Just be ready when he lands,” Carpathia said, the first hint of frustration in his voice.

“The only place I would accept a ride to is the airport,” Rayford said. “And I’m almost there. Don’t have Mac set down any closer to this mess.”

“Captain Steele,” Carpathia began again, condescendingly, “I admire your irrational belief that you can somehow find your wife, but we both know that is not going to happen.”

Rayford said nothing. He feared Carpathia was right, but he would never give him the satisfaction of admitting it. And he would certainly never quit looking until he proved to himself Amanda had not survived.

“Come with us, Captain Steele. Just reboard, and I will treat your outburst as if it never—”

“I’m not going anywhere until I’ve found my wife! Let me talk to Mac.”

“Officer McCullum is busy. I will pass along a message.”

“Mac could fly that thing with no hands. Now let me talk to him.”

“If there is no message, then, Captain Steele—”

“All right, you win. Just tell Mac—”

“Now is no time to neglect protocol, Captain Steele. A pardoned subordinate is behooved to address his superior—”

“All right, *Potentate* Carpathia, just tell Mac to come for me if I don’t find a way back by 2200 hours.”

“And should you find a way back, the shelter is three and a half clicks northeast of the original headquarters. You will need the following password: ‘Operation Wrath.’”

“What?” *Carpathia knew this was coming?*

“You heard me, Captain Steele.”



Cameron “Buck” Williams stepped gingerly through the rubble near the ventilation shaft where he had heard the clear, healthy voice of Rabbi Tsion Ben-Judah, trapped in the underground shelter. Tsion assured him he was unhurt, just scared and claustrophobic. That place was small enough without the church imploding

above it. With no way out unless someone tunneled to him, the rabbi, Buck knew, would soon feel like a caged animal.

Had Tsion been in immediate danger, Buck would have dug with his bare hands to free him. But Buck felt like a doctor in triage, having to determine who most urgently needed his help. Assuring Tsion he would return, he headed toward the safe house to find his wife.

To get through the trash that had been the only church home he ever knew, Buck had to again crawl past the remains of the beloved Loretta. What a friend she had been, first to the late Bruce Barnes and then to the rest of the Tribulation Force. The Force had begun with four: Rayford, Chloe, Bruce, and Buck. Amanda was added. Bruce was lost. Tsion was added.

Was it possible now that they had been reduced to just Buck and Tsion? Buck didn't want to think about it. He found his watch gunked up with mud, asphalt, and a tiny shard of windshield. He wiped the crystal across his pant leg and felt the crusty mixture tear his trousers and bite into his knee. It was nine o'clock in the morning in Mt. Prospect, and Buck heard an air raid siren, a tornado warning siren, emergency vehicle sirens—one close, two farther away. Shouts. Screams. Sobbing. Engines.

Could he live without Chloe? Buck had been given a second chance; he was here for a purpose.

He wanted the love of his life by his side, and he prayed—selfishly, he realized—that she had not already preceded him to heaven.

In his peripheral vision, Buck noticed the swelling of his own left cheek. He had felt neither pain nor blood and had assumed the wound was minor. Now he wondered. He reached in his breast pocket for his mirror-lensed sunglasses. One lens was in pieces. In the reflection of the other he saw a scarecrow, hair wild, eyes white with fear, mouth open and sucking air. The wound was not bleeding, yet it appeared deep. There would be no time for treatment.

Buck emptied his shirt pocket but kept the frames—a gift from Chloe. He studied the ground as he moved back to the Range Rover, picking his way through glass, nails, and bricks like an old man, assuring himself solid purchase.

Buck passed Loretta's car and what was left of her, determined not to look. Suddenly the earth moved, and he stumbled. Loretta's car, which he had been unable to budge moments before, rocked and disappeared. The ground had given way under the parking lot. Buck stretched out on his stomach and peeked over the edge of a new crevice. The mangled car rested atop a water main twenty feet beneath the earth. The blown tires pointed up like the feet of bloated roadkill. Curled in a frail ball atop the wreckage was the

Raggedy Ann–like body of Loretta, a tribulation saint. There would be more shifting of the earth. Reaching Loretta’s body would be impossible. If he was also to find Chloe dead, Buck wished God had let him plunge under the earth with Loretta’s car.

Buck rose slowly, suddenly aware of what the roller-coaster ride through the earthquake had done to his joints and muscles. He surveyed the damage to his vehicle. Though it had rolled and been hit from all sides, it appeared remarkably roadworthy. The driver’s-side door was jammed, the windshield in gummy pieces throughout the interior, and the rear seat had broken away from the floor on one side. One tire had been slashed to the steel belts but looked strong and held air.

Where were Buck’s phone and laptop? He had set them on the front seat. He hoped against hope neither had flown out in the mayhem. Buck opened the passenger door and peered onto the floor of the front seat. Nothing. He looked under the rear seats, all the way to the back. In a corner, open and with one screen hinge cracked, was his laptop.

Buck found his phone in a door well. He didn’t expect to be able to get through to anyone, with all the damage to cellular towers (and everything else above ground). He switched it on, and it went through a self-test and showed zero range.

Still, he had to try. He dialed Loretta's home. He didn't even get a malfunction message from the phone company. The same happened when he dialed the church, then Tsion's shelter. As if playing a cruel joke, the phone made noises as if trying to get through. Then, nothing.

Buck's landmarks were gone. He was grateful the Range Rover had a built-in compass. Even the church seemed twisted from its normal perspective on the corner. Poles and lines and traffic lights were down, buildings flattened, trees uprooted, fences strewn about.

Buck made sure the Range Rover was in four-wheel drive. He could barely travel twenty feet before having to punch the car over some rise. He kept his eyes peeled to avoid anything that might further damage the Rover—it might have to last him through the end of the Tribulation. The best he could figure, that was still more than five years away.

As Buck rolled over chunks of asphalt and concrete where the street once lay, he glanced again at the vestiges of New Hope Village Church. Half the building was underground. But that one section of pews, which had once faced west, now faced north and glistened in the sun. The entire sanctuary floor appeared to have turned ninety degrees.

As he passed the church, he stopped and stared.

A shaft of light appeared between each pair of pews in the ten-pew section except in one spot. There something blocked Buck's view. He threw the Rover into reverse and carefully backed up. On the floor in front of one of those pews were the bottoms of a pair of tennis shoes, toes pointing up. Buck wanted, above all, to get to Loretta's and search for Chloe, but he could not leave someone lying in the debris. Was it possible someone had survived?

He set the brake and scrambled over the passenger seat and out the door, recklessly trotting through stuff that could slice through his shoes. He wanted to be practical, but there was no time for that. Buck lost his footing ten feet from those tennis shoes and pitched face forward. He took the brunt of the fall on his palms and chest.

He pulled himself up and knelt next to the tennis shoes, which were attached to a body. Thin legs in dark blue jeans led to narrow hips. From the waist up, the small body was hidden under the pew. The right hand was tucked underneath, the left lay open and limp. Buck found no pulse, but he noticed the hand was broad and bony, the third finger bearing a man's wedding band. Buck slipped it off, assuming a surviving wife might want it.

Buck grabbed the belt buckle and dragged the body from under the bench. When the head slid

into view, Buck turned away. He had recognized Donny Moore's blond coloring only from his eyebrows. The rest of his hair, even his sideburns, was encrusted with blood.

Buck didn't know what to do in the face of the dead and dying at a time like this. Where would anyone begin disposing of millions of corpses all over the world? Buck gently pushed the body back under the pew but was stopped by an obstruction. He reached underneath and found Donny's beat-up, hard-sided briefcase. Buck tried the latches, but combination locks had been set. He lugged the briefcase back to the Range Rover and tried again to find his bearings. He was a scant four blocks from Loretta's, but could he even find the street?



Rayford was encouraged to see movement in the distance at Baghdad Airport. He saw more wreckage and carnage on the ground than people scurrying about, but at least not all had been lost.

A small, dark figure with a strange gait appeared on the horizon. Rayford watched, fascinated, as the image materialized into a stocky, middle-aged Asian in a business suit. The man walked directly toward Rayford, who waited expectantly, wondering if he could help. But as the man drew near, Rayford realized he was not

aware of his surroundings. He wore a wing-tipped dress shoe on one foot with only a sock sliding down the ankle of the other. His suit coat was buttoned, but his tie hung outside it. His left hand dripped blood. His hair was mussed, yet his glasses appeared to have been untouched by whatever he had endured.

“Are you all right?” Rayford asked. The man ignored him. “Can I help you?”

The man limped past, mumbling in his own tongue. Rayford turned to call him back, and the man became a silhouette in the orange sun. There was nothing in that direction but the Tigris River. “Wait!” Rayford called after him. “Come back! Let me help you!”

The man ignored him, and Rayford dialed Mac again. “Let me talk to Carpathia,” he said.

“Sure,” Mac said. “We’re set on that meeting tonight, right?”

“Right, now let me talk to him.”

“I mean our personal meeting, right?”

“Yes! I don’t know what you want, but yes, I get the point. Now I need to talk to Carpathia.”

“OK, sorry. Here he is.”

“Change your mind, Captain Steele?” Carpathia said.

“Hardly. Listen, do you know Asian languages?”

“Some. Why?”

“What does this mean?” he asked, repeating what the man had said.

“That is easy,” Carpathia said. “It means, ‘You cannot help me. Leave me alone.’”

“Bring Mac back around, would you? This man is going to die of exposure.”

“I thought you were looking for your wife.”

“I can’t leave a man to wander to his death.”

“Millions are dead and dying. You cannot save all of them.”

“So you’re going to let this man die?”

“I do not see him, Captain Steele. If you think you can save him, be my guest. I do not mean to be cold, but I have the whole world at heart just now.”

Rayford slapped his phone shut and hurried back to the lurching, mumbling man. As he drew near, Rayford was horrified to see why his gait was so strange and why he trailed a river of blood. He had been impaled by a gleaming white chunk of metal, apparently some piece of a fuselage. Why he was still alive, how he survived or climbed out, Rayford couldn’t imagine. The shard was imbedded from his hip to the back of his head. It had to have missed vital organs by centimeters.

Rayford touched the man’s shoulder, causing him to wrench away. He sat heavily, and with a huge sigh toppled slowly in the sand and breathed his last. Rayford checked for a pulse,

not surprised to find none. Overcome, he turned his back and knelt in the dirt. Sobs wracked his body.

Rayford raised his hands to the sky. “Why, God? Why do I have to see this? Why send someone across my path I can’t even help? Spare Chloe and Buck! Please keep Amanda alive for me! I know I don’t deserve anything, but I can’t go on without her!”



Usually Buck drove two blocks south and two east from the church to Loretta’s. But now there were no more blocks. No sidewalks, no streets, no intersections. For as far as Buck could see, every house in every neighborhood had been leveled. Could it have been this bad all over the world? Tsion taught that a quarter of the world’s population would fall victim to the wrath of the Lamb. But Buck would be surprised if even a quarter of the population of Mt. Prospect was still alive.

He lined up the Range Rover on a southeastern course. A few degrees above the horizon the day was as beautiful as any Buck could remember. The sky, where not interrupted by smoke and dust, was baby blue. No clouds. Bright sun.

Geysers shot skyward where fire hydrants had ruptured. A woman crawled out from the wreckage of her home, a bloody stump at her shoulder

where her arm had been. She screamed at Buck, “Kill me! Kill me!”

He shouted, “No!” and leaped from the Rover as she bent and grabbed a chunk of glass from a broken window and dragged it across her neck. Buck continued to yell as he sprinted to her. He only hoped she was too weak to do anything but superficial damage to her neck, and he prayed she would miss her carotid artery.

He was within a few feet of her when she stared, startled. The glass broke and tinkled to the ground. She stepped back and tripped, her head smacking loudly on a chunk of concrete. Immediately the blood stopped pumping from her exposed arteries. Her eyes were lifeless as Buck forced her jaw open and covered her mouth with his. Buck blew air into her throat, making her chest rise and her blood trickle, but it was futile.

Buck looked around, wondering whether to try to cover her. Across the way an elderly man stood at the edge of a crater and seemed to will himself to tumble into it. Buck could take no more. Was God preparing him for the likelihood that Chloe had not survived?

He wearily climbed back into the Range Rover, deciding he absolutely could not stop and help anyone else who did not appear to really want it. Everywhere he looked he saw devastation, fire, water, and blood.



Against his better judgment, Rayford left the dead man in the desert sand. What would he do when he saw others in various states of demise? How could Carpathia ignore this? Had he not a shred of humanity? Mac would have stayed and helped.

Rayford despaired of seeing Amanda alive again, and though he would search with all that was in him, he already wished he had arranged an earlier rendezvous with Mac. He'd seen awful things in his life, but the carnage at this airport was going to top them all. A shelter, even the Antichrist's, sounded better than this.